

Viewing Response-to-Intervention through an Educational Change Paradigm:

What Can We Learn?

Frank J. Sansosti and Amity Noltemeyer

Kent State University

Response-to-Intervention (RtI), a framework for improving academic and behavioral outcomes for all students, can be viewed as a current example of an educational change initiative. Given the difficulties that some schools may be experiencing when implementing RtI effectively, it is important to examine prior educational change conceptualizations and research for factors that may facilitate or impede current educational reform. The purpose of this article is to (a) present RtI as a current educational reform initiative, (b) use Fullan's (2007) theoretical model as a framework through which to present information related to educational change, and (c) provide suggestions regarding how such educational change literature can inform and improve the implementation and future sustainability of RtI in schools.

KEYWORDS: Response to Intervention, Educational Reform, Educational Change, Systemic Consultation

Since the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) published *A Nation at Risk*, widespread demand for educational reform has remained a dominant theme across the United States. As policy changes were enacted related to special education (e.g., reauthorizations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, IDEA), significant changes within general education policy also occurred. Perhaps the most notable of these changes was passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002), which requires schools to provide high-quality instruction to all students through the use of evidence-based practices provided by highly qualified teachers. When Congress passed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004), further emphasis was placed on using systemic approaches that integrate general and special education into a unified system. Recent changes in these federal policies, combined with the proliferation of empirically based interventions designed to prevent problems and promote students' academic and behavioral success, have created an unprecedented opportunity for schools to expand their use of alternative service delivery models (Graczyk, Domitrovich, Small, & Zins, 2006).

At the present time, Response to Intervention (RtI) is a prominent alternative service delivery model receiving much attention in contemporary educational literature (see Jimerson, Burns, & VanDerHeyden, 2007 for a review of related contemporary scholarship). Although RtI has been given much attention as the result of the IDEIA, successful implementation requires collaboration among all educators, not just those involved in the process of determining special education eligibility (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003). RtI is defined as the change in behavior or performance as a function of an intervention (Gresham, 2002; 2007). More specifically, RtI is a service delivery approach for providing services and interventions to students at increasing levels of intensity based on progress monitoring and data analysis. Successful implementation of RtI requires the adoption of three essential components: (a) multiple tiers of interventions, (b) a problem-solving method, and (c) a data collection system to inform educational decision-making (Batsche et al., 2005). Furthermore, the fidelity with which a RtI model is implemented relies heavily on consistent behavior among educators (Gerber, 2005).

RTI AS AN EDUCATIONAL CHANGE INITIATIVE

RtI cannot be characterized by one educational program or curriculum, but rather a transformation in the way that systems, schools, and professionals operate. As such, RtI represents a current educational change initiative. Aligned with directives called for within NCLB, as well as within provisions of the IDEIA of 2004, the application of RtI in schools has received legislative support. Unfortunately, research has suggested that even when supported by legislation, most educational change efforts result in limited implementation success (Berends, Bodilly, & Kirby, 2002), possibly due to the fact that programming decisions are based upon a top-down model of change. In fact, in an extensive study of comprehensive school reform prompted by NCLB, Vernez, Karam, Mariano, and DeMartini (2006) discovered that none of the 350 schools included in the study had fully implemented systemic change and student outcomes were less than optimal.

Challenges inherent in educational reform, coupled with compelling needs to improve schools and research on how to promote change, demand that school improvement efforts develop and operate with shared meaning and responsibility. Schools must emphasize conditions that build capacity of both the system (school) and the individuals (educators) who work within the system. From this perspective, the fundamental ingredients necessary for educational change are improving relationships and increasing the skill set of all involved, rather than relying on top-down reform. This concept of building capacity among systems and individuals is not new and led Sarason (1995) to conclude that,

School reformers know one thing: *changing the attitudes and practices of school personnel* [italics added] is as difficult as it is necessary [and] I have never met a school reformer who did not struggle against the perception that he or she was trying to level a mountain with a teaspoon.

Presently, Sarason's (1995) analogy is likely resonating nationwide among administrators and practitioners in schools who are attempting to implement and sustain RtI practices. While some districts/schools appear to have solved many of the challenges of implementing RtI, others remain perplexed as to how to incorporate assessment and intervention practices into a systemic approach (see Jimerson, Burns, & VanDerHeyden, 2007 for a review of multiple implementation efforts across the country). Rather than continue with the status quo – namely partial or incomplete implementation of RtI with minimal prospect for sustainability, it is important for schools to begin exploring several questions that have the potential to improve how RtI is implemented. Three of these questions are as follows: What are the common barriers schools are facing when implementing RtI? Are there factors that promote or predict successful systemic change required to implement RtI? How can RtI become ingrained into school culture and maintained over time?

Although there are no known studies empirically examining the aforementioned questions, some answers can be gleaned from the literature related to implementation of School-Wide Positive Behavior Support (SWPBS). Because SWPBS shares several salient features with RtI (e.g., tiered approach to service delivery, ongoing progress monitoring, using data to make important educational decisions), and is often implemented concurrently, research related to the systemic successes and identified barriers of SWPBS has the potential to inform RtI implementation. For example, George, White, and Schlaffer (2007) examined two schools that successfully adopted SWPBS to determine common features that might have fostered implementation. They found that the following features were present in both schools: (a) stakeholder agreement regarding change, (b) a shared vision for change, (c) committed administrative leadership, (d) autonomous teachers, (e) school psychologist as leaders, change agents, and consultants, (f) financial resources committed to the cause, and (g) organizational restructuring. Similar results were found by Kincaid, Childs, Blaise, and Wallace (2007), who explored barriers and facilitators to SWPBS implementation among 70 educators representing 26 Florida schools. Using a modified nominal group process, the researchers identified 21 barrier themes and 19 facilitator themes. Absence of staff buy-in was the most significant barrier, followed by insufficient use of data, inconsistent implementation, inadequate reward system, insufficient time, elevated staff turnover, and philosophical differences between/among administrators and educators. District support was the most important facilitator, followed by factors such as SWPBS project support, effective use of data, administrative support, school-level/team trainings, plan implementation, and team membership. Together with the findings from George, White, and Schlaffer (2007), this research suggests that educational change can be successful when conditions that build the capacity of both organizations and individuals are created and the

culture of classrooms and schools are changed (D. Kincaid, personal communication, June 21, 2007).

Due to the current dearth of research examining factors that may promote or inhibit successful implementation of RtI, it is useful to review prior theoretical models and efforts of educational change with the intent of informing future educational practice. Specifically, this review will examine Fullan's (1991, 2001, 2007) theoretical model as a framework through which to resolve problems in the implementation of RtI. Although a myriad of theoretical models related to educational change exist (e.g., Professional Learning Community model, Learning Organization Model), Fullan's three-phase model of educational change has been formative in shaping educational change research and has provided direction to researchers, policymakers, and educators over multiple decades (Datnow, 2006). Moreover, Fullan's model appears to have direct applicability to the current practice of RtI.

FULLAN'S THREE-PHASE MODEL OF EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

Fullan (1991, 2001, 2007) suggested a three-phase model of educational change that is widely espoused throughout the educational research community. Phase I, often called initiation, includes the processes that result in a decision to proceed with change. This phase can range from a single decision by a district-level administrator to broad-based employee support. Phase II, referred to as implementation, involves the first experiences at attempting to implement educational change. The implementation phase, typically the first two or three years of a new program, is critical to a change program's success, in part, because level of implementation has been linked to degree of improvement in student outcomes (Datnow & Stringfield, 2000). Finally, Phase III, institutionalization, involves sustaining and continuing to build the program over time. Despite the best of intentions, many school change efforts do not reach Phase III. Moreover, limited research describes the process of change that promotes the continuations of reform within successful schools.

Perhaps the central notion suggested by this model is that change is not a linear event – it is a dynamic process (Fullan, 2001, 2007; Hall & Hord, 2001). That is, there are no shortcuts to this process, and events that transpire at one phase can easily alter decisions made at previous or future phases. Fullan has suggested that total time from Phase I to Phase III could range from 3 to 5 years for moderately complex changes, and 5 to 10 years for large scale initiatives. Furthermore, multiple factors, both facilitory and inhibitory, influence the overall outcome at each phase. The intensity and complexity of these factors can be determined, in part, by the specific nature of a change program.

Phase I

In Phase I, numerous factors can impact the decision to initiate educational change. These factors include teacher advocacy, existence of quality innovations, legislative or policy changes, and recommendations from external change agents (Fullan, 2007). In a testament to the importance of decision-making at Phase I as a unified process, Datnow and Stringfield (2000) found that schools that never achieved strong implementation of their chosen educational change initiative had initiated reform for opportunistic reasons (e.g., funding was provided, to gain favor from a district-level administrator), rather than in response to a clear need for reform. Additionally, in an extensive analysis of 12 educational change efforts in 10 states, Huberman and Miles (1984) discovered that staff and administrative motives for adopting educational change were varied and multiple. For example, staff motives included seeking to adopt change in response to such factors as administrative pressure, professional growth, and social influence (e.g., learning about the success of a colleague implementing a change program). In contrast, administrative motives involved adopting a change in response to a current need, gaining additional resources, and improving results. The researchers also discovered that district office administrators were the key decision makers in 11 out of the 12 reform initiatives, and teachers were involved in the decision to adopt the initiative in only 6 of the 12 initiatives. Taken together, results from these two studies suggest that: (a) reasons for initiating reforms (i.e., Phase I) may be varied; (b) decisions to initiate educational reform efforts are more likely to emerge from administrators rather than from teachers; and (c) shared decision-making and vision between teachers and administrators, at Phase I, is typically not sought or achieved. Unfortunately, as prior research has suggested (George et al., 2007; Kincaid et al., 2007), lack of a shared vision among educators can inhibit or entirely thwart implementation of educational reform efforts.

RtI is currently supported not only through educational legislation (e.g., NCLB, IDEIA), but also various educational advocacy groups and research panels (i.e., National Reading Panel; National Summit on Learning Disabilities; National Research Council Panel on Minority Overrepresentation). As a result of this legislative and external support, many states have begun the process of reconceptualizing the special education referral process, as well as furthering the practice of early literacy instruction, early intervention, and ongoing data collection for all learners. Some states, such as Ohio, also have incorporated grants to assist school districts in the development and implementation of RtI practices within schools. What can be gleaned from such support is the undeniable conclusion that RtI is not “this year’s new thing” and educators likely will continue to be presented with opportunities and challenges to adapt their educational practices. However, a more troubling conclusion is the fact that much of the call to action for RtI appears to be of a top-down approach. When used in isolation, top-down approaches are among the most commonly cited factors associated with failed attempts to reform education (e.g., Sarason, 1990; Fullan, 1994). Thus, what is paramount at this point, is a detailed discussion of how the practice of RtI in schools can move beyond from the apparent top-down initiation stage, toward understanding, acceptance, and implementation by all educators who share common attitudes and beliefs regarding the need for RtI. Although IDEIA is considered special education legislation, the implementation of RtI also has profound implications for the roles of general education teachers. As a result, it is essential to garner the coordinated involvement and support of both regular and special educators.

Phase II

At Phase II (i.e., implementation), additional factors can facilitate or inhibit educational reform efforts. More specifically, Fullan (2007) suggests that three interactive factors affect change at Phase II, including change characteristics, local characteristics, and external factors. A review of these factors is presented along with research from prior initiatives as the building blocks for conceptualizing how RtI will need to be implemented in order for full-scale change to occur.

Characteristics of Change

Within characteristics of change, four sub-factors influence Phase II implementation. First, a perceived need for change is critical. When all stakeholders recognize a need for the change, implementation is increased (Huberman & Miles, 1984). Second, clarity about the goals and procedures of the change process is important. Gross, Giacuinta, and Bernstein (1971) found a lack of clarity regarding teachers’ own roles in reform both before and after implementation, suggesting an absence of clarity even among the individuals implementing change. Complexity, or the difficulty and extent of the proposed change, is the third variable influencing Phase II implementation. Although simple changes are easier to implement and result in reduced staff burnout, they minimize organizational change and staff enhancement (Huberman & Miles, 1984). Finally, the quality and practicality of the change initiative may influence implementation. For example, Sarason (1995) found that implementation of an innovative math program was not successful because teachers did not perceive that the program was practical or of quality.

In consideration of RtI, it is important to consider the degree of change necessary for educators to reach full implementation and sustainability. RtI represents a paradigm shift in both form of instruction and educational decision-making. Unfortunately, confusion exists among professionals regarding the process of RtI at advanced stages when making educational decisions (Fuchs, 2003; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2004; Speece, Case, & Molloy, 2003). Moreover, many districts are grappling with how to fit RtI within their current system. Without clarity from leaders in the field and lack of procedural steps to assist districts, RtI likely is perceived as a very complex process and educators may feel uncomfortable adapting their own behaviors. In addition, teachers may not fully understand the nature of intervention inherent in RtI and feel that it is an unfair process for struggling students. Given the lack of clarity, complexity of procedural steps, and misinterpretation of what constitutes RtI, it will be essential for state departments of education, districts, and schools to provide a clear and compelling rationale for change rather than relying on legislative directives or

mandates. That is, RtI initiatives may be doomed for failure unless educators responsible for implementing change understand the need for such reform, as well as reflect on their own attitudes and beliefs related to practice.

Local Factors

District factors. Factors related to the school district are influential and often have lasting impact. For example, the more frequently individuals in a school district have had negative experiences with previous change attempts, the more cynical and oppositional they become regarding future change attempts (Fullan, 2007). In addition, without district-wide administrative support of an initiative, any change sought by district employees likely will not progress.

The relationship between district-level administrative support and change implementation is not a new concept and has been investigated during prior change efforts. For example, Datnow and Stringfield (2000) found a positive relationship between strong district-level support and degree of change implementation among 13 schools implementing educational change programs. Additionally, in an analysis of the barriers of systemic change within urban schools, McDermott (2000) demonstrated an inverse relationship between the tenure of leadership (e.g., superintendents) and the likelihood of implementing and sustaining school reform efforts. That is, newer superintendents were more likely to replace previous school reform initiatives with new ones, perhaps in an effort to set themselves apart from a faltering predecessor. Finally, Sarason (1995) found that teacher support and implementation may be lower when decisions are made at the top of the administrative hierarchy without regard for reactions of individuals and groups to how the decisions were made, announced, and implemented.

Clearly, for RtI implementation to be effective, districts and schools need to demonstrate support for change. However, it is more important for districts and schools to assess the degree to which their staff are part of the process of change. Recent decades have witnessed a plethora of education initiatives, most of which have been abandoned. Cynicism and opposition are likely very high, and without involving as many educators in the decision making process for implementing RtI, they likely will view reform less than enthusiastically.

School board and community. Characteristics of the board and the community also can influence Phase II effectiveness. As state governments are becoming more directive and supervisory, the role of the school board is blurred (Danzberger, Carol, Cunningham, Kirst, McCloud, & Usdan, 1987). Nevertheless, school boards do have the potential to affect large-scale change efforts indirectly. For example, school boards have the power to hire and fire superintendents who either support or oppose various change initiatives (Fullan, 2007). In addition, school boards can be influenced by hearing concerns – voiced by district staff, parents, and community members – regarding student outcomes, change efforts, and a host of other variables related to curriculum, behavior, and mental health concerns. In this way, school boards can act as a springboard for creating a shared vision within a community.

Community relations too, in particular parent-school relations, influence not only student achievement but also the success of school implemented educational change programs (Epstein, 1995). For example, in their study of reform initiatives in 350 schools, Vernez et al. (2006) found that “model” reform schools were more likely than their matched counterparts to implement family involvement initiatives. Sarason (1995) also investigated the role of parents who attended seminars on teaching math had on the success of a math curriculum. Specifically, parents stated that they were confused by the content in the seminars and, subsequently, dropped out. Later, these parents reported resentment that they had to spend so much more time with their kids doing homework and were having to relearn how math was taught. These factors may have ultimately contributed to the failure of the program in the school district.

For similar reasons, schools must begin to see parents as contributors to change and progress rather than barriers, and must seek programs that enhance involvement of parents (Epstein, 1995). The abundance of research on the importance of community-school relations led Matthews (1996) to conclude, “School reform may need to be recast as community building...certain things may have to happen in our communities before we can see the improvements we want in our schools (p. 3).” Such a statement remains true when attempting to implement RtI. In fact, families might help problem-solve initial concerns, as well as help

develop and implement intervention programs. Moreover, parents can monitor their children at home and provide external data as part of progress monitoring. Technically savvy districts and schools may even provide parents with access to web-based databases for tracking student progress. In this way, parents, teachers, and children may see the outcomes associated with their efforts almost instantaneously.

Building principals. Building principals strongly influence implementation of educational change. For example, Hall and Hord (2001) found that principals' leadership styles could greatly influence the success of implementation. Upon retrospectively examining teachers' implementation of an innovative science curriculum in a large school district over a two-year period, the researchers discovered that three groups of schools emerged based on their level of implementation, and that these groupings were explained by principal leadership style in the buildings. Specifically, they found that high implementing schools had Initiator principals. These principals provided very active support of the teachers in learning and utilizing the new curriculum. In contrast, the middle implementing schools had Managing principals, who did not push their teachers to do beyond the minimum requirements. Finally, the lowest implementing schools had Responder principals. Responders did not follow through with helping the teachers with the new initiative.

Teachers. Teachers also can affect Phase II effectiveness. Depending on their prior experiences and personality characteristics, teachers may be more or less open to change processes. Although there are exceptions, teachers often report feeling misperceived, misunderstood, misled, and powerless in relation to administrators, parents, students, and the general public; ultimately, these feelings can impact their openness to change (Sarason, 1995).

In a study of a large urban school district introducing an inclusion model, Weiner (2003) asked teachers involved in the project to complete a forced-choice survey on the conditions necessary to support an inclusion model. The researchers found that over 74% of the responding teachers reported that teachers' attitudes toward the students was the first or second most important condition necessary for successful inclusion. These results suggest that teacher support, or "buy-in," is important to consider when implementing educational change. Research on SWPBS initiatives also suggests the importance of teacher buy-in; specifically, it has been suggested that buy-in from 80% of staff in a building is necessary to achieve implementation success (Horner & Sugai, 2005).

So, if teacher buy-in to a program is critical, what factors influence buy-in? Turnbull (2002) studied this question. Six hundred and seventy one teachers who were involved in educational change efforts in one of two cohorts from three New Jersey school districts completed surveys assessing buy-in. Turnbull found that seven variables accounted for a significant percentage of the variance in teacher buy-in: training, administrator buy-in, developer support, resources, knowledge of budget, influence in school-level implementation, and control over classroom implementation. Additionally, this study showed the importance of gaining teacher support initially, as buy-in from year one was the most significant predictor of buy-in at year two.

Sarason (1995) also examined teacher involvement in the change process. He found that classroom teachers were minimally, if at all, participating in decision-making. It turned out that teachers felt administrators forced the program upon them. The lack of participation in decision-making may have contributed to the resistance encountered by teachers and ultimate failure of the program.

Teachers also need adequate professional development in order to obtain the skills necessary to implement the desired change effort. Knoff and Batsche (1995) explored the results of an educational change initiative, Project ACHIEVE, over a three-year period. Specifically, the researchers compared a school that implemented Project ACHIEVE to a matched control school during the same time period. Results suggested that staff training and follow-up was critical to the success of Project ACHIEVE. Specifically, regular education teachers benefited from multidimensional training that had clear goals, a multi-year perspective, and a mastery/skill-based orientation.

In their examination of 12 school reform initiatives, Huberman and Miles (1984) also examined the role of professional development and ongoing technical assistance in increasing implementation. The researchers concluded that, "Large-scale, change-bearing innovations lived or died by the amount and quality of assistance that their users received once the change process was under way" (p. 273). Specifically, they discovered benefits in providing ongoing opportunities such as external conferences, in-service trainings, team meetings, materials, peer consultation, external consultation, and access to central office personnel.

Taken together, the four aforementioned subfactors – districts, boards and community, principals, and teachers – are critically important in achieving desired change. Moreover, these factors can be quite malleable. Just because a school is lacking in one or more of the areas does not mean the change is doomed to failure; rather, it means that intervention is necessary to affect the changes necessary to facilitate change. It is crucial for researchers, districts, and schools to consider such internal factors with regard to RtI implementation. That is, in order for RtI to be implemented and, more importantly, sustained, each of these factors will need to be assessed and subsequent professional development activities will need to occur.

Phase III

Unfortunately, many schools do not progress to Phase III (institutionalization). Datnow and Stringfield (2000) found that only one of 13 schools was continuing to implement their chosen reform by the third year of the change program. Even among those schools that do progress to Phase III, there has been minimal research on the factors that may support sustainability over time due to the time and resource intensive nature of such investigations. Despite a relative dearth of research on Phase III, several factors might influence the decision to continue and institutionalize an educational change program. For example, Huberman and Miles (1984) found that solid institutionalization depends on a variety of factors, including administrative pressure, a lack of significant staff resistance, low staff turnover, embedded changes in the system infrastructure (e.g., policy, funding, and personnel), and teacher-administrator harmony. The researchers also discovered that sites that failed to reach strong institutionalization exhibited vulnerability. For example, these sites did not establish structures to protect the program from funding crises or administrative turnover. These sites also were prone to indifference, and undertook few planned actions to stabilize and secure the program over time. Programs abandoned at Phase III include those that lacked fidelity of implementation from the start, as well as those that once implemented change well, but lost government funding (Fullan, 2007). Reasons for abandonment at this stage include a lack of interest or ability to fund the project, as well as a lack of interest or support from both district- and building-level administrators. Regarding funding and resources, a common complaint from educators is that they do not have the resources to sustain change programs (Sarason, 1995).

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: CRITICAL PRACTICE NEEDS

Often, educational professionals are so intrigued by a promising educational change program, and its potential to improve and revitalize student performance, that they jump full force into the program with little concern for systemic factors. Instead, what is needed is forethought and planning to facilitate systemic match with the initiative in order to avoid setting it up for failure. The implementation of RtI practices in schools is perhaps even more demanding of planning. RtI represents a significant paradigm shift for educators. By considering Fullan's model of educational change and the factors within it that may support or impede the change, practitioners can better accomplish this end. Whether a school is considering implementing RtI or has already attempted implementation with limited success, there are several steps that can be taken to maximize the likelihood of implementation success. These factors are presented as part of a model that can be adopted by school-based professionals.

Step One: Evaluating Needs

Although previously discussed barriers and facilitators are important to consider, it is equally important to assess the degree to which each barrier or facilitator manifests itself in a particular setting before creating and implementing a plan to enhance RtI implementation. For example, what are teacher beliefs and knowledge regarding RtI? Do principals actively support RtI? Do district-level administrators support RtI? How are the board and community involved in RtI implementation efforts? What external factors may be, or are, facilitating or impeding RtI efforts? In addition to examining facilitators and barriers suggested by educational change research, it is also necessary to consider hypothesized barriers and facilitators unique to RtI initiatives. For example, are there established collaborative problem-solving teams? Are there adequate interventions at each

tier? Are there mechanisms to ensure progress-monitoring data is collected frequently and reliably? Has there been adequate professional development to enhance knowledge and skills related to RtI?

In order to answer these questions, it is important to collect and analyze multiple sources of data using a democratic decision-making model. A collaborative planning team can determine specifically what types of data are needed and how they will be collected. For example, creating and distributing a stakeholder survey on perceptions of RtI within the district can provide useful information related to these issues. The survey could address the presence and absence of facilitators and barriers as well as their perceived importance in RtI implementation. In addition, focus groups and interviews with teachers, administrators, board members, and the larger community may help clarify these issues. Finally, direct observations of processes and resources may help identify strengths as well as areas of needs.

Step Two: Developing a Plan

Once specific needs have been established, the true challenge involves intervening in the areas that may be impeding success. Prior to doing so, a plan should be developed that outlines (a) specific goals for each area of need, (b) methods for meeting the goals including considerations of time, resources, and personnel, (c) a timeline for meeting the goals, and (d) ongoing and specific methods for evaluating progress. When creating this plan, it is important to consider the long-term nature of RtI implementation and sustainability, establishing challenging yet achievable goals over a multi-year time span. Following are practical suggestions for addressing several common barriers to RtI implementation.

Teacher knowledge and beliefs. If teacher knowledge is found to be a barrier, it is important to identify the specific skill or knowledge deficits and plan professional development to address this need. In fact, as a result of the variety of professionals involved in the implementation and monitoring of RtI, coupled with the variety of skills necessary to implement RtI well, continuous professional development is necessary even when a deficit in knowledge is not readily apparent (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005).

Batsche et al. (2006) provided useful recommendations for planning professional development activities related to RtI. Specifically, they suggest that successful professional development programs adequately address beliefs and attitudes, knowledge, and skill. Regarding beliefs and attitudes, research has suggested that two factors predict successful implementation of a new skill: understanding the need for the skill and believing that one has the necessary skill (Sarason, 1990). Additionally, any professional development program on RtI should build a strong knowledge base. For example, teachers should have a solid understanding of the difference between assessment for identification and assessment for intervention, the range of interventions available at each tier, the importance of progress monitoring measures in RtI, the relationship between problem-solving and RtI, and the importance of using data to determine appropriate interventions (Batsche et al.) Finally, it is crucially important to assess the skill sets of educators responsible for the basics of RtI implementation. Skills needed to implement RtI may include assessing for intervention, interpreting assessments, matching intervention to student needs, presenting intervention outcomes to others, and engaging in the problem-solving process.

Although Batsche et al. (2006) address the content of professional development, an additional consideration is the delivery format. Showers and Joyce (1996) suggest four levels of professional development: awareness, conceptual understanding, skill acquisition, and application of skills. Awareness can be increased through didactic instruction that increases a trainee's knowledge and principles, conceptual understanding can be addressed using modeling and demonstration techniques, and skill acquisition can be enhanced through simulated practice exercises that are observed and critiqued by a facilitator. Finally, application of skills is reached when the trainee can successfully apply the new concept or intervention with fidelity in his or her school.

How can such information be presented and reinforced? In their evaluation of Project ACHIEVE, Knoff and Batsche (1995) discussed an effective professional development system that consists of (a) clear goals and outcomes, (b) a multi-year focus, (c) an initial focus on specific intervention skills followed by a later focus on decision-making skills and processes, (d) convenient scheduling, and (e) scaffolded instruction. Specifically, the authors initially conducted two three-hour teacher trainings separated by three weeks.

After this initial training, teachers were provided with follow-up support from a “master teacher” who would provide modeling and performance feedback. Finally, the “master teacher” was available “on-call” for further support during the year. During the second year of implementation, teachers were also provided with “booster sessions” to reinforce concepts taught in the initial professional development sessions. Using such a comprehensive approach to professional development delivery, coupled with the content proposed by Batsche et al. (2006), has the potential to maximize the effectiveness of RtI professional development efforts.

Development of collegiality. It is critically important to develop collegial working relationships and a shared sense of responsibility among school staff and administrators. RtI is not an individual effort; rather it represents a collective initiative that requires systemic change and participation. One way to address this issue is to provide stakeholders with multiple opportunities to participate in democratic decision-making and planning from the decision to adopt the initiative through the institutionalization phase. This may involve opportunities to participate in decision-making committees or focus groups. Another strategy is to promote and reinforce teaming processes in the building that support shared decision-making and responsibility. For example, establishing grade-level teams as well as student problem-solving teams would be appropriate. Finally, increased teacher-administrator communication and shared decision making has the potential to improve outcomes.

Supportive leadership. Another area that can promote RtI implementation is supportive leadership. As proposed by Fullan (2001), support for RtI from three administrative domains can particularly facilitate educational change: district leadership, building leadership, and the school board. Supportive leadership is critical because it can: (a) provide a much needed accountability mechanism, (b) result in policies that will directly impact the degree to which RtI will be mandated within the school, and (c) facilitate a collegial systems-level focus necessary to implement and sustain RtI.

If administration is a barrier to RtI, it is first necessary to evaluate why. If it is due to lack the knowledge or beliefs about RtI, consider alternative methods for incorporating administrators into the previously mentioned professional development methods. In doing so, ensure that professional development also addresses those interests and concerns most relevant to administrators. For example, many administrators are interested in the legislative mandate for RtI, the impact of RtI on outcomes and statewide testing, and issues related to personnel, resources, and funding. Alternatively, if administrative support is lacking for other reasons (e.g., lack of perceived time to dedicate to the initiative), it is important to develop a plan to work collaboratively to seek mutually appropriate solutions.

Shared vision. As previously mentioned, it is important for individuals within a school or district to converge on a shared vision of RtI. One way to accomplish this is through involving all stakeholders in decision-making. For example, having stakeholders participate in a needs assessment, assist in developing a plan, and have a voice throughout the implementation are all beneficial. Additionally, it may be useful to create a school or district “vision statement” related to RtI based on stakeholder thoughts. This vision statement can be posted prominently for staff to see, and can be reviewed frequently. Actions can then be evaluated on the degree to which they align with the vision. Finally, collaboratively setting realistic goals in each of the three phases of the reform will help solidify the vision and resultant action.

Technical assistance and support. Like many other educational change initiatives, the likelihood of maximizing RtI implementation may be related to the amount of technical assistance and support provided to school staff. Although these needs are similar to the previously discussed professional development needs, technical assistance and support also includes such needs as materials, technology, funding, and assistance implementing policies and procedures. In addition to technical assistance and support provided by the district, it is important to explore other resources. For example, there may be resources available through grants, state or regional education agencies, and special education regional resource centers. When developing a plan, it is important to specify what support will be provided, how it will be provided, and who will provide it.

Step Three: Implementation, Evaluation, & Future Planning

Once a solid plan to address the aforementioned needs is developed, it is critical to monitor implementation and evaluate results frequently. If evaluation data suggest interventions are not successful at enhancing RtI implementation, it is important for educational teams to examine the reasons why this is so and reformulate interventions to address hypothesized causes. If interventions are successful at enhancing RtI implementation, it may be time to consider longer-term planning aimed at building infrastructures to support RtI sustainability and institutionalization over time. For example, it would be important to consider how RtI could be maintained in the face of a loss of a key stakeholder in the system, funds to support RtI, or other crises. In addition, it is important to consider how to continue to build the capacity of both the system and individuals to progress to higher levels of RtI implementation.

FUTURE RESEARCH NEEDS

When considering RtI, it appears on the surface level that many of the same factors that impact the success of generic educational change may be relevant. For example, it is clear that legislation, parents, teachers, and administrators all have unique roles to play in supporting RtI implementation. In addition, it appears that the presence of some components of alternative educational change models such as a shared vision, increasing staff capacity, and a sense of community may inform RtI efforts. However, these assumptions have not been examined empirically. As a result of the difficulty many schools are having in implementing and sustaining RtI, it is critical that this examination is undertaken. One way for this issue to be explored is to examine qualitatively the differences between schools that are implementing RtI well and those who are not. Another method may be to examine barriers and facilitators to RtI. Regardless of the method chosen to examine these issues, educational change models (e.g., Fullan, 2001) can serve as a guide for what types of barriers and facilitators to explore.

SUMMARY

Despite the potential for RtI to effect positive change in students and systems, additional planning is needed to prepare systems and individuals for its implementation. Because research has shown that the first year of implementation of an educational change initiative predicts ultimate implementation success (e.g., Vernez et al., 2006), it is especially important to devote sufficient time and resources to properly planning RtI initiatives at all three phases of the change process: adoption, implementation, and institutionalization. Failing to plan effectively may result in haphazard decision-making that could lead to the ultimate demise of the initiative, as has happened with so many educational reforms in the past. Using Fullan's theoretical model of educational reform this review has provided several practical recommendations for planning effectively for RtI initiatives. Important elements to ensure when planning include supportive leadership, collegiality, affirmative teacher beliefs and knowledge, and sufficient capacity of both systems and individuals. It is hoped that these recommendations can be used as a starting point to ensure a future for RtI that departs from many of the failed educational initiatives of the past.

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